

Message Text

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ACTION SPTA-02

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E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: ELAB, PN, PQ
SUBJ: PN LEADER DENOUNCES "SABOTAGE" IN CANAL TRANSIT
LEVEL

1. DR. ROMULO ESCOBAR BETHANCOURT, PERSONAL ADVISER TO
GENERAL TORRIJOS, MET JULY 31 IN A PUBLIC GATHERING WITH
PANAMANIAN-CITIZEN CANAL ZONE WORKERS. ABOUT 400 PERSONS
WERE PRESENT, INCLUDING UNION LEADERS. TORRIJOS HAD BEEN
EXPECTED, BUT DID NOT SHOW.

2. ESCOBAR, AMIDST HIS WIDE-RANGING REMARKS AND REPLIES
TO QUESTIONS, EMPHASIZED AN ALLEGED SLOWDOWN IN PANAMA
CANAL TRANSITS DURING RECENT WEEKS. ESCOBAR HINTED AT
SABOTAGE BY RECALCITRANT PANCANAL EMPLOYEES AND CLAIMED
THAT THE SLOWDOWN HAD FOLLOWED RATIFICATION. "ONE HOUR
AFTER THE EXCHANGE OF RATIFICATIONS, TRANSITS THROUGH
THE CANAL BEGAN TO DECLINE."

3. ESCOBAR SOUGHT TO REASSURE PEASANT, RELIGIOUS, AND
LOCAL CREDIT UNION LEADERS, BUT IN SOME CASES STRUCK RAW
NERVES. HE DENIED THAT GEN. TORRIJOS' REFERENCES (IN A
RECENT SPEECH AT SAN MIGUELITO) TO ZONIANS AS A
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"PRIVILEGED CLASS" REFERRED IN ANY WAY TO PANAMANIAN
WORKERS. YOUR BENEFITS, HE ASSURED THEM, ARE NOT
PRIVILEGES BUT "CONQUESTS WHICH YOU HAVE ATTAINED."
IT WAS NOT THE PANAMANIAN BUT THE GRINGOS WHO "HAVE
PRIVILEGES INSULTING (INDIGNOS) AND OFFENSIVE TO THE
PANAMANIAN WORKERS," HE SAID.

4. COMMENT: ESCOBAR SAID THAT TORRIJOS' ABSENCE FROM THE MEETING COULD BE EXPLAINED BY THE FACT THAT HE WAS "INVESTIGATING" THE ALLEGED SLOWDOWN. CANAL ZONE UNION LEADERS BELIEVE HE DID NOT SHOW UP BECAUSE HE DID NOT WANT TO FACE THE STORM RAISED BY HIS SAN MIGUELITO REMARKS. WE HAVE INFORMATION FROM A RELIABLE SOURCE THAT TORRIJOS APPEARS TO BELIEVE THAT SOME SKULLDUGGERY IS INVOLVED IN RECENT PANCANAL PROBLEMS.

5. THERE HAVE BEEN PROBLEMS. CANAL EFFICIENCY APPEARS TO HAVE FALLEN OFF IN RECENT TIMES. FOR EXAMPLE, THE ACCIDENT RATE IS UP. TO A CERTAIN EXTENT THIS APPEARS TO HAVE ARISEN FROM A HEAVY WORKLOAD, BUT LOW MORALE MAY BE A FACTOR, TOO. AS RECENTLY AS TEN DAYS AGO A BACKLOG OF 70 - 90 SHIPS HAD DEVELOPED -- CONSIDERABLY ABOVE NORMAL. BUT SINCE THEN, THE BACKLOG HAD BEEN REDUCED TO ONLY NINE VESSELS, CONSIDERABLY LESS THAN NORMAL. UNFORTUNATELY, THERE HAVE BEEN A COUPLE OF WELL-PUBLICIZED ACCIDENTS (E.G., THE RAMMING OF MIRAFLORES LOCKS BY A LIBERIAN VESSEL JULY 30), AND THESE HAVE ADDED TO THE SPECULATION THAT "SABOTAGE" OR A WORK ACTION OF SOME SORT IS INVOLVED.

6. ONE OF THE MOST UNFORTUNATE ASPECTS OF THE CURRENT DISPUTE IS THE EFFECT IT IS HAVING ON THE CANAL ZONE POPULATION AND PANAMANIAN PANCANAL WORKERS IN GENERAL. THERE IS ENOUGH DISTRUST BETWEEN THE PANAMANIAN GOVERNMENT LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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AND THE CANAL ZONE ALREADY, WITHOUT SUCH REMARKS AS THOSE MADE BY TORRIJOS AND ESCOBAR. STATE, COUNTY AND MUNICIPAL UNION (AFSCME) LEADERS SATURNIN MAUGE AND LUIS ANDERSON HAVE THROWN IN THEIR LOT WITH THE PANAMANIAN GOVERNMENT, BUT THIS SORT OF THING UNDERCUTS THEIR POSITION.

7. INCIDENTALLY, WE HAVE NO EVIDENCE THAT THERE IS ANY DELIBERATE SLOWDOWN OR ANY OTHER JOB ACTION. IN FACT, TOTAL TRANSITS DURING RECENT WEEKS HAVE BEEN ABOVE ANTICIPATED LEVELS, IN LARGE PART BECAUSE OF HEAVY MOVEMENT OF ALASKAN CRUDE THROUGH THE CANAL. SO FAR AS WE KNOW, THE PANCANAL WORK FORCE IS WORKING HARD UNDER TRYING CIRCUMSTANCES. JORDEN

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